

**Pain in the Pocketbook**

**By Sam Farr**

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***Good Times, Santa Cruz, Calif.***

When he exited office in 2001, President Clinton left us with a national unemployment rate of 4.2 percent and a federal budget surplus of \$550 billion. A gallon of gas cost around \$1.45.

Today, under the unsteady hand of President Bush, the national unemployment rate stands at 5.5 percent (California is much worse, at 6.9 percent), the federal budget is in the red to the tune of \$400 billion and we're being pummeled by gas prices that refuse to dip below \$4. As usual, Santa Cruz has it even worse, where we fork over an extra 40 or 50 cents per gallon.

If this is the White House definition of progress, I'd hate to live through hard times. That being said, I'm sure the president and vice president are tickled by the \$123 billion in profits that oil companies raked in last year.

Democrats are doing their best to sweep up after the failed domestic policies of the president. A new national minimum wage kicked in today, raising the floor from \$5.85 to \$6.55 an hour. This doesn't affect Santa Cruz, of course, which benefits from California's much higher minimum wage, but it does help millions of families across the country.

There have been some successes on the unemployment front as well, particularly the Democratic victory in extending unemployment benefits by an additional 13 weeks. That safety net will help more than 600,000 people in California alone, and more than 3.5 million nationwide.

But my colleagues in the House and Senate can plug only so many holes in the levee, and the president just keeps blasting away.

The latest GOP tactic in Congress has been especially egregious. Republican leaders have written "talking points" on gas prices for their members, and they're sticking to them like white on rice. I'm sure you've heard them, they're made up of three words: "Drill. Drill. Drill."

As so often happens, their argument is a great big red herring.

The Republicans know that Democrats, along with the vast majority of the country, don't believe oil companies should have a free hand with their drills. Oil rigs don't belong in the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary. Oil rigs don't belong in Yosemite National Park. And no, oil rigs don't belong in the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge.

So why do they continue with this line of attack? Because they also know that Americans are worried sick about the cost of gas, and they believe that fear will overwhelm any concern for the environment.

They also believe that Americans won't take the time to listen to the facts. I've written about them before, but they bear repeating:

If we open up our marine sanctuary to drilling, we won't see a drop of oil for at least a decade. The same holds true for ANWR and any other site that isn't currently under production.

Oil companies already have 68 million acres of land open to drilling, both onshore and offshore. That's 106,000 square miles, or a combined area the size of Nevada.

Eighty-one percent of all oil and gas under federal control is already available to drilling, but that's not enough for Big Oil.

So what gives? How can Republicans possibly think this line of attack will work? Their only hope is that Americans won't make the effort to inform themselves. It's a disappointing line of

thought, but it's the best they can hope for. After years of failed policies, Americans are ready for change.

I hosted a telephone town hall meeting last week for residents of Santa Cruz and Aptos, and more than 3,000 people listened in. As you might expect, questions about the job market, gas prices and health care were the most common.

The simple fact is that Americans are living in fear. And unfortunately, the White House is using that to its advantage, capitalizing on it in an attempt to improve GOP chances in November.

So what can be done to tackle the problems that are making life so difficult for so many? As I've said many times before, we have to start with the failed occupation of Iraq, an adventure that is costing the United States \$120 billion a year. In the five minutes it takes to read this column, the U.S. government will have spent more than \$1 million on that failed war.

And for those who are reading this column, everyone must make sure the president understands the will of the public. It may not divert his course, but it may make him think twice before he ransacks our pristine land for extra drops of profit. Call him and let him know. His number is 202-456-1111.